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Interrogating and Analysing Narrative Structure Through Comic Books

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Contextualizing Statement

This thesis is a unique contribution to knowledge in the field of practice-led comic studies. It explores the limits of the comic book form as a system of communication. It does this through written and practical components. The practical component takes the form of exhibited structural comics, and the design of the dissertation itself. The written dissertation consists of four books, each of which contains the research that would constitute a chapter of a traditional thesis. These books have been written and designed to be read in any order. Taken as a whole, these individual pieces argue for a poststructural poetics of comics theory that foregrounds the medium's unique potential for non-hierarchical, non-hegemonic communication.

The medium of comics can be hard to define. It cannot be essentialized into its component parts. I believe this is due to the fact that it is more than a simple compilation of formal structures, but a complex methodology of meaning-making that includes an array of overlapping languages and semiotic codes. My thesis relies on this interdependency of signification strategies and applies this form of comics-thinking to the PhD as a whole. Each book in my thesis makes a self-contained argument, but taken together, the individual strands of thought can be seen to weave together into an overarching pattern. The relationships between arguments is not hierarchical, but rhizomatic, where each element refers to many others in a co-operative manner. My thesis can be seen as both an examination and example of how narrative strategies drawn from the comics medium can be utilized to create emergent, multi-modal knowledge.

This project arose from an ongoing interest in liminal and experimental comics and hopes to contribute to that field. It explores how the multiple semiotic strategies inherent in visual narratives can be utilized to communicate concepts inexpressible through mono-modal language. I utilize a range of post-modern and (post)structuralist theories to interrogate the functioning of intersecting semiotic systems within comics. For example, one book focuses on how comics structure inflects reader interpretation of maps presented within graphic narratives. I also devote a book to the role of media specificity in reader understanding.

My thesis also explores the role of subjectivity in non-fiction narratives. This is done through the focus on autobiographical comics as a subject of my practice, but also through my inclusion of this material throughout the written portion of my thesis as well. I query the notion that any part of my work is authoritatively

objective and not open to situational inquiry. I examine through case studies how canonical authors have depicted subjectivity, in particular the subjectivity of childhood memory, in graphic memoirs.

Each of the books I have designed is related to the thesis as a whole in the same way an individual panel interacts within a page of a comic. On a comics page, panels show singular instances of time and/or place that relate to the other panels. There is space between the panels to integrate their various separate points and arguments into a cohesive whole. Taken in relation to each other, they create meaning that transcends the sum of the parts but is also contextually contingent. Similarly, in my thesis there are arguments that weave between books, and intertextual references. In comics, some characters appear consistently from panel to panel while others only provide context to specific situations and so do not feature throughout; in my thesis, some theorists and schools of thought appear in every book, whereas others relate only to a single book's argument.

I believe the role the reader plays in constructing meaning from the interaction between the various signifiers and languages presented in comics is what makes it unique in narrative media. By eschewing the standard presentational format associated with PhD research I remediate my theories of multi-modal signification strategies through my dissertation design. In format and presentation I drew inspiration from Chris Ware's *Building Stories* (2012), as well as George Perec's *Life a User's Manual* (2003) and Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (1998). All three narratives present the reader with modular vignettes that are self-contained yet support each other in building an internally consistent world.

Just as the arguments within the books are discreet instances that relate to each other, like panels on a page, so the written theory sits next to the practice work, two parts of the same narrative whole, a diptych or double-page spread. There is no divide between the theory and practice in this dissertation. I explore subjectivity through the autographic structural comics presented in the PhD exhibition as much as in the book design. In both cases, I am pushing the limits of structures: of comics and of PhDs.

The artefacts I am referring to as structural comics are a collection of objects that range from doll houses, to diorama replicas of my childhood home, to lanterns. In these I utilize a variety of graphic narrative structures outwith traditional comics

forms in order to explore how the reading strategies needed to interact with these works push beyond the limits of conventional comic consumption. This work was inspired by the 'Hypercomics' exhibition at the Pumphouse Gallery in London in 2010 (Gravett, 2010), Dave McKean's subsequent gallery comics (2014), Karrie Fransman's three-dimensional work (2014), and more traditionally printed comics that focus on architecture as narrative, such as Frédérique Rusch's *Untitled Comic* (2013). My practice may exist in more dimensions than a codex-bound comic, but they have been designed to be read using many of the same mechanisms.

There is a natural tendency when dealing with one's own past to attempt to reconcile inconsistencies or gaps in memory in order to form a cohesive self-image. To counteract any attempt to present a wholly unified and reliable narratorial self, I present the same places and memories through various angles and media. This technique can be seen in the childhood autobiographies I analyse in the book *Childhood Memoirs—Autobiographical Approaches*. I make explicit some of the dissonant 'truths' myself and other members of my family were presented with, as an attempt to consciously confront the fragility of utilizing such collectively constructed memory to form a stable self-image.

In the book *Childhood Memoirs—Autobiographical Approaches*, I argue that the use of multiple signification strategies can be used by a creator to enunciate what may be unspeakable or incomprehensible, such as moments of trauma. I pay special attention to how subjectivity is presented in graphic memoirs within this context, as the drawn nature of comics allows for shifts in the status of the author/narrator that are unique to the medium. This book is the closest analog to a literature review, a staple of traditional PhDs. This chapter focuses on three autobiographies, *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (2008), *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel (2006) and *Stitches* by David Small (2009), that are widely available, and have been written about in academic publications. In my book, I present in-depth analysis of each of the three autobiographies in a different format, to highlight the differing techniques each author uses to frame their subjectivity. The physical act of making was also an important part of my process, literally sewing the disparate sections of this text together, joining the pieces into a narrative whole.

In *Comics as a Synthetic Medium—A Very Short Introduction*, I contextualize my research and comics studies more generally within non-binary, non-hierarchical concepts of rhizomatic knowledge structures. I utilize the concept of text in the

Barthesian sense when discussing comics as a cohesive mode of communication with its own structuralist rules, rather than text as solely lexicographic writing, or the verbal mode of visual-verbal communication. In comics, written text and imagery can actively oppose each other, creating a space where new meaning can be synthesized from this tension. This is, I would argue, Derrida's deconstruction, Benjamin's inclusion of cultural production in literature, or Barthes' writerly text. Each utterance on a comics page may convey multiple levels of independent meaning, making it unique among narrative media. By examining the semiotic and structural theories presented by Barthes and Derrida, as well as Benjamin, Deleuze, Wittgenstein and others, I develop the case for a comics-specific theory of trans-medial, subjective, deconstructed communication.

In *Mapping the Journey—The Cartography of Autobiography*, I explore the workings of maps as a visual system, and their deployment within comics. I analyse the mythology of the supposed inductive system of representation in mapping, discussing the inherent subjectivity of representations of place. I then interrogate how including a secondary visual semiological system, that of the map, within the primary system of comics impacts reader perception of truth through verifiability. I present a portfolio of atlases in this book that offer a range of subjective explorations of space through mapping structures. I also explore the intersection of non-representational theory within geography and authentication within autographics (a term used in comics studies to denote visually presented autobiographical work).

The main atlas within this portfolio integrates mapping and comics affordances. It opens with a foldout that reproduces three maps that I work with throughout this book and have also exhibited. Presenting at the outset the maps I will be utilizing with minimal remediation gives the reader a reference through which to approach the iterations of these maps in the rest of the atlas. The map comics function both as self-contained narratives that are presented separately and distinct of the linguistic text, and as integral elements to the function of the overall visual-linguistic argument. I enact this through my placement of these map comics in relation to the verbal-linguistic text through this atlas.

In *Media Specificity of Non-traditional Graphic Narratives* I focus on the impact of distributing graphic narratives in digital and/or printed formats. I assert that neither digital nor print is superior to the other, but deliver different experiences

to the reader. Through close analysis of the formal qualities inherent in digital and physical representation of comic content, I articulate the qualities unique to each distribution strategy and theorize ways that creators can take advantage of the media at their disposal.

For this book more than any of the others the specific affordances of the physical design had to be foregrounded. The size of this book, dwarfing all the other components of the thesis, draws immediate attention to the materiality of this object. Utilizing the construct of architectural plans engages with physicality, but also evokes objectivity. The plans are of my childhood home, which appears in many forms throughout my PhD, and the data is taken from the town's own public records. This chapter acts as perhaps the most direct bridge between the written theory and the structural comics practice. Not only do the blueprints layout the spaces recreated in the exhibition, but I also utilize the same technique of undercutting any inherent objectivity presented by the form through the overlay of my incongruous subjective recollections. In this book, these subjective recollections take the form of translucent sheets of paper depicting the furniture layouts, as I recall them, in the rooms of the house at various periods of my life, as well as textual commentary on my memories associated with these spaces.

Together, this collection of books and the documentation of the accompanying practice create a unique contribution to the critical thinking about how the specific structures of the visual-verbal medium of comics can create new knowledge. It is both the theories explored about the medium within this collection of books and documented artifacts and the way that I implement those very theories through the formal presentation that is unique within the academic study of comics. I ask the reader to lay aside any conceptual segregation between theory and practice. There is a dialogue between content and form in this thesis that requires the active participation of the reader in meaning creation, just as there is in the comics medium. This is accomplished through the integrated practice-text presented here and the exhibition that is documented on the supplemental data DVD. It is the way creators use the structures inherent in comics and the way that readers assemble the parts presented to them that opens up the potential of the medium to express concepts that could not be articulated through traditional methods of communication. By taking advantage of the space between languages, and the interdependence of semiotic strategies within a comics page, creators can encourage readers to form meaning from the

constructive friction between these elements. My experimentations with the limits of the medium are posed as a challenge to problematize these boundaries and hopefully engender more critical creative practice to come.

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Dissertation Abstract

How can the structures of graphic narratives help us to interrogate, analyse, and ultimately ground stories of ourselves and our world? By not relying solely on verbal or visual language, but the complex interplay between multiple signification strategies, comics open up possibilities for transcending the limits of any single linguistic mode and more fully enunciating the complex layers of superimposed truths that make up our lived experiences. In this doctoral project, I utilize media-specific analysis of graphic narratives and interrogate the multi-modal communication strategies inherent in comics. The result is a multidisciplinary construction of the structural and semiotic modes of comics as an enactment of contemporary narrative ideals that privilege reader-centric, subjective constructions of meaning.

My submission consists of four chapters of written research, to be submitted at the end of January, and a collection of autobiographical narrative works that will form an exhibition which will be shown at the time of the viva in April. The presentation of the textual material is an inseparable component of the content, and a piece of practical work in itself. The chapters can be read in any sequence; for the purposes of this abstract, I will discuss them in alphabetical order. My practice work challenges the traditional use of comics-specific affordances, such as panel borders, gutter, use of space as time, and other verbo-visual techniques by remediating them outwith book and digital book-like objects we associate with graphic narratives. Each chapter in the dissertation is its own book-object that enacts the content as well as relates to the larger body of practice work.

Childhood Memoirs—Autobiographical Approaches

The use of multiple signification strategies allows for communication that transcends the limits of textual or verbal language and can allow a creator to enunciate what may be unspeakable or incomprehensible, such as moments of trauma. I pay special attention to how subjectivity is presented in graphic memoirs within this context, as the drawn nature of comics allows for shifts in the status of the author/narrator that are unique to the medium.

Comics as a Synthetic Medium—A Very Short Introduction

The 'introductory' chapter contextualizes my research and comics studies more generally within non-binary, non-hierarchical concepts of rhizomatic knowledge structures that utilize the concept of text in the Barthesian sense as a mode of communication rather than solely lexicographic writing. In comics,

Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that this thesis has been composed and designed by myself, Kat Lombard-Cook. I furthermore confirm that:

- a) all the research is my own, except for sources that are clearly and fully referenced
- b) that this work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification
- c) that any included publications are my own work, except where indicated throughout the thesis with sources provided.

text and imagery can actively oppose each other, creating a space where new meaning can be synthesized from this tension. This is Derrida's deconstruction, Benjamin's inclusion of cultural production in literature, or Barthes' writerly text. Each utterance on a comics page may convey multiple levels of independent meaning, making it unique among narrative media. By examining the semiotic and structural theories presented by Barthes and Derrida, as well as Benjamin, Deleuze, Wittgenstein and others, I develop the case for a comics-specific theory of trans-medial, subjective, deconstructed communication.

Mapping the Journey—The Cartography of Autobiography

In this chapter, I analyse the mythology of the supposed inductive system of representation in mapping and explore how including a secondary visual semiological system, that of the map, within the primary system of comics impacts reader perception of truth through verifiability. I also explore the intersection of non-representational theory within geography and authentication within autographics.

Media Specificity of Non-traditional Graphic Narratives

The focus of this chapter is on the impact of disseminatory (re)mediation on the medium of graphic narratives. I assert that neither digital nor print is superior to the other, but deliver different experiences to the reader. Through close analysis of the formal qualities inherent in digital and physical representation of comic content, I articulate the qualities unique to each distribution strategy and theorize ways that creators can take advantage of the media at their disposal.

The practical element of my submission takes the form of a collection of objects that utilize a variety of graphic narrative structures outwith traditional comics forms in order to explore facets of my childhood memories. The exhibition will be constituted of several lanterns, dioramas and dolls' houses, as well as some printed material. I attempt to ground my memories in architecture and place, while aware that the sense of solidity this lends my recollections is a false sense of objective security. To counteract any attempt to present a wholly unified and reliable narratorial self, I present the same places and memories through various angles and media. I make explicit some of the dissonant 'truths' myself and other members of my family were presented with, as an attempt to consciously confront the fragility of utilizing such collectively constructed memory to construct a stable self-image.

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The chapter on media specific analysis first appeared as an article in the Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics, volume 6 issue 1. I thank editor Dr. David Huxley for inviting me to contribute and editor Dr. Joan Ormrod for shepherding me through the publication process.

Were it possible to name them all, I would like to thank so many in the international academic comics community at all the wonderful conferences and events I have attended in the past four years. The connections I have made and the conversations spurred by collecting critical comics theorists from all backgrounds and areas of expertise has been invaluable. Special thanks must go to the organizers of these conferences: David and Joan who are listed above, Dr. Laurence Grove, Dr. Ian Hague, Dr. Catriona MacLeod, Dr. Chris Murray, Dr. Julia Round, and Phillip Vaughan.

While I have met too many colleagues and made too many friends at events over the past four years to name here, I would like to single-out my Scottish postgraduate compatriots: Damon Herd, Hattie Kennedy, and Lisa Tannahil. Our specific areas of study may be different, but having such brilliant and interesting colleagues close-by has helped in more ways than I can possibly say, and our times together has always bolstered my spirits and given me confidence. I hope that I was of help to them as well.

Another group that has always given me confidence and strength is the comics community in Glasgow. Again, there are too many people to name individually, but everyone at Team Girl Comic has been inspirational to me and supported my work. Our local chapter of Laydeez Do Comics made me feel included as a maker as well as a researcher, and introduced me to Neil Slorance, another wonderfully kind and supportive local creator. I am truly lucky to have been befriended by such a selfless and giving group of artists.

Of course I couldn't have finished this degree without the love and care of my partner, Stoo Lombard-Cook. There simply are not words for what he has done for me. I wouldn't be here at all were it not for my supportive, inspiring and caring mother, Mary Lombard. A huge thanks to my whole family, both in the US and in Scotland for all of the support and patience they have shown me: Martha, Joe, and Sean King; Stephen and Bonny Cook; Ann and Jim Hamilton; Stephen and Anne Cook; Billy Cook; Andrew Lamond; Linda, Jim, Melanie and Rebecca Goldie; and all the rest.

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